

Long overlooked, Manchester's canals are coming out from the shadows.

Words Mark Hillsdon. Photograph Len Grant.

CANALWATCH

Canals in the modern city have never had a very good press. More often than not described as stagnant and litter-strewn, with banks perpetually lined with factories (derelict) and railway sidings (disused), it's little surprise that city burghers have tried to cover all trace of them, hiding them away like an embarrassing relative from a bygone age.

Manchester has about five miles of waterfront including the River Irwell, but for years only the foolhardy would venture along the badly lit towpaths of the Rochdale and Ashton canals, that snake through the city centre.

But gradually things have changed as the true worth of canals, and their potential for bringing new life back into city centres, has been realised. And in the same way that a zero

tolerance approach is helping to reclaim the streets, Manchester's canals are also benefiting from a 'people first' approach.

Action Manchester Waterways has been central to this renaissance, working closely with the likes of the police, businesses, Manchester City Council and the City Centre Management Company to revitalise the city's waterways.

As development co-ordinator Hazel Lord explains: "People like water and sitting near water – it's calming. Developers are now



CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT JUSTINE CURRAN, PC COLIN HEIL AND SARAH FLYNN OF THE MERSEY BASIN CAMPAIGN

introducing canal side walkways and areas for office workers to sit and eat their lunch, integrating the surrounding environment into their developments."

Margaret Fletcher, chair of the Manchester Bolton and Bury Canal Society, agrees. "The more the canals are actually used, the less crime there tends to be, simply because people are around."

City Centre Canal Watch is helping in this fight against crime by enlisting the help of local residents and businesspeople to monitor the stretch of the waterway close to them and report any incidents to the police.

Inspector Stuart Barton is in charge of the area policing team in the city centre. He believes that Canal Watch is already having an impact, and that what little crime does still take place is now very low level.

"We need to provide a reassurance to people who have never been down there before and that's what we aim to do," he explains. "We'll keep walking along the canals, showing that presence and making ourselves available. And if people report matters to us, we'll deal with them."

And it's hoped that the new safer, cleaner Manchester canals will also attract more narrow boaters, many of whom have been wary of passing through a major city centre.

The rebirth of Manchester's canals is already evident in Castlefield and along Canal Street, once no-go areas but now "shining beacons" of what can be achieved with imagination and vision, says Lord.

There are ongoing plans to transform other stretches of the canal network too, with better access, signposting, footpaths and security. Heritage trails, and the artistic lighting of historic buildings are also planned.

"It's about opening the canals up as a feature of the city rather than covering them up, which is what has been done for such a long time," says Lord.

Steve Connolly, the regional chair of the Inland Waterways Association, believes that the mile of the Rochdale Canal from Piccadilly Basin to Castlefield offers pedestrians an alternative way of walking across the city centre. "People are absolutely gob-smacked," he enthuses. "They pop out at one of the exit points and think 'Bloody hell, I'm here.' I've been past here a million times in my car and never knew it existed." That's heart warming when you hear that."

Until recently few would have been so impressed with Piccadilly Undercroft, a cavernous space where the Rochdale Canal passes beneath the Rodwell Tower office block near Piccadilly station. But this too has been transformed. A mural now blocks off the dark tunnels where ne'er-do-wells once lurked, the lighting has been revamped and CCTV introduced.

There's also a new PA system that allows the police to actually speak to people from a city centre control room and as a result, says Barton, crime has dropped dramatically.

"We can give warnings and reassurances," he continues. "It's done wonders for us down there as far as deterring people and moving people on."

And significantly it's all been done with an eye on the future. "It's perhaps not a short cut or somewhere you would walk at night at the moment," says Lord, "but as the Piccadilly Basin area develops, particularly residentially, it will open up that area so there will be lots of people walking through."

Fletcher's passion is the Manchester Bury and Bolton Canal, which enters Manchester as the River Irwell. The canal is currently being restored but to Fletcher: "it's the fact that there are so many benefits from the restoration that's going to be important, rather than just the canal itself." Over £180 million in private investment is being used to bring 40 hectares of land along its banks into use, creating 1,300 new homes and over 6,000 jobs.

Back in the city, many of the old warehouses that line Manchester's canals could easily have gone the same way as the chimneys that once dotted the skyline, but the red brick buildings work next to the water – they're in the right place – which is why development companies are buying them up and canal side living is at a premium.

A recent report on the restored Rochdale Canal shows that since 1990 up to £260 million has been invested in commercial developments alongside the canal, and a large proportion of this has been residential.

But a few words of caution. Connolly warns of creating "dark canyons" where there's no thought of working with or encompassing the canal but where developers construct: "big tall buildings right on the edge of the canal, with the backs facing the water, to get the maximum space."

Lord is sympathetic to this view. "It's all very well putting up these buildings everywhere but it's got to be done sustainably, they've got to last, and there's got to be a use for them, otherwise we'll end up back where we started ten years ago, with buildings sat along the canal that aren't doing anything."

David Roberts, a director of the Igloo Regeneration Fund, believes that canals can bring significant benefits as long as developers understand that urban regeneration needs to connect back to the history of a site.

Igloo is part of a partnership working on New Islington in Ancoats. It's an area Roberts describes as bounded by two canals, not that much notice was taken of either of them when it was redeveloped in the 1970s and people relocated to it. "It tried to provide smart new homes for council tenants but it didn't work as urban design because it turned its back on the history of the area.

"If you're really going to make canals work as part of the community, then get people to use them, and bring activity, vitality and vibrancy back to the area." **S**



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